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Elizabeth Gerherding

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Mrs ELIZABETH GERBERDING



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no. 1.

THE CANAL.

Hail to the mighty thought,
Hail to the man who fought,
Hail to the men who wrought,
Hail, all hail the CANAL!

They cleft a continent in twain,
They cleft the black spine of the land,
They cleft the red quicksilver sand,
They hewed their way from main to main.

To work the white man's will to fight,
A hundred thousand black men slaved
In jungle, pit and swamp, and braved
Each hour the wrack of dynamite.

Gaunt giant cable towers strode,
Flung far their web of spider strands,
A-pace they wove their iron bands,
And breathless, strode along the road.

Giraffe-like drills stamped fast their feet,
Spurred on for fear of being late
With their allotment to create
Straight, slender wells where forces meet.

Great dredgers ate a mountain through,
Ate in the morning, noon and night,
A-tier on tier to a dizzy height,
Till all the slipping land they drew.

In monster caverns locks were set,—
The man-made fiords of Panama,—
And, flooding through them from afar
The waters of the oceans met.

For this there flowered in the West,
The beauty of the world of art,
The fruit of ages and the heart
Of all endeavor in the best.

But palaces and courts will live:
The cloisters in the patio,
The pillared lake, the glow will go
With us through all the years we live.

We see and we shall always see
The beauty of this gift of Fate,
And we shall see across the Gate
An arch of triumph frame the sea.

Hail, all hail the CANAL!

WHAT SEES THE OWL?

His velvet wing sweeps through the night;
With magic of his wondrous sight
He oversees his vast domain,
And king supreme of night doth reign.

Around him lies a silent world,
The day with all its noise is furled;
When every shadow seems a moon
And every light a sun at noon.

How welcome from the blinding glare
Is the cool grayness of the air!
How sweet the power to reign, a king,
When day his banishment will bring!

For him the colorless moonlight
Burns brilliant, an aurora bright;
The forest's deepest gloom stands clear
From mystery and helpless fear.

He sees the silver cobwebs spun,
The dewdrops set the flowers have won,
The firefly's gleam offends his sight,
It seems a spark of fierce sunlight.

Clear winter nights when he so bold,
"For all his feathers is a-cold,"
Sees the Frost-spirit fling his lace
And fashion icicles apace,

At his weird call afar and faint,
A sleepy echo, like the quaint
Last notes of some wild chant, replies,
And mocks his solitude,—and dies.

TO A PLAYER (Ellen Terry).

As when a mesmerist enchains the thought
And holds another's will till he shall grow
The slave of slaves a subtle power has wrought,
To serve the fancy of a friend or foe,
So, queen of human joy and human woe,
You hold humanity a willing slave;
Lost to itself it lives in you to know
What vistas stretch from cradle unto grave.
And, as you blend together hopes and fears
A breathless watcher sheds forgotten tears;
Or, in the picture of a phantom crime,
Feels once again a peril lost in time.
Oh, painter of life's pictures, Age and Youth
Behold your brush dipped in the vivid truth!

TO A SUN DIAL.

Before you, shadowy messenger of time,—
A herald caught within a mesh of laws,—
I see the ghosts of by-gone ages pause,
And note the warning traced upon your face.
Sometimes, you marked for them a day of joy
That beat its rapturous moments all too fast;
Sometimes, a cruel day dragged through at last,
And left a broken life upon your wheel.
In sunlight, stern, inexorable, grim,
You breathed an exhortation like a hymn;
And in the storm a silence eloquent,
To tell eternal vigilance was sent.
Yet, life was ever then as now, a race,
A fleeting shadow on a dial's face.

TO THE REDWOOD.

Within thy mighty shaft, Oh redwood tree!
A legend like a guarded secret lies.
Oh give it to thy friends whose loving eyes
Behold the best of Nature's work in thee!
It breathes a wondrous tale of priests who came
In treasure-laden ships from India's strand,
To rear within this fabled eastern land
The temples of their faith in Buddha's name.
Transformed to forest monarchs, mute they dwell;
The spirit of the New World wrought the spell,
That, ages after, one should come and claim
The glory in a greater prophet's name.
Yet not in vain thy faith, Oh tree divine,
The fairest temple of the world is thine!

TO "THE BEND."

All the thoughts within my quiver,
Of the blue enamelled river,
Of the forest calling ever,
"To my red gods yield forever,"
Fail, and ever my endeavor
Sends no arrow to its end
In the praises of The Bend.

TO AN OLD MAN.

(G. T. B.)

Oh, friend whose genial soul to all endears
Solve but this riddle, tell us this, Oh Sage!
Almost a century of life in years,
Yet twenty summers count thy spirit's age.
What is the secret of thy silvered head,
Thine ever-buoyant heart of youth denies?
What is the mystic power that fain defies
Old Age who plans no more but waits instead?
To thee in loving pledge it hath been said
Thou art too wise to be forever wise:
Is this the spring where thine elixir lies
And cheer and jest its magic fountain head?
Perchance, it may be this one happy truth,
For boon companion thou hast chosen Youth.

LABOR AND CAPITAL.

Two men are face to face within a boat:
The one bends all his strength to pull the oars,
The other holds the tiller ropes,—afloat,
The boat glides on between the watching shores.
Deep in the stream the weighted stern sinks near,
Weighted with gold the steersman hoards and holds;
Above the flood the lightened bow swings clear,—
Until the maelstrom seizes and enfolds.
Out of the whirlpool will the stronger one
Swim for his life, unweighted, right the boat,
Seize the lost oars and tiller he has won,
Be oarsman, steersman, both,—if he would float.
God grant that ere this come, these two who hate,
May love, and see the danger of this fate!

THE COMRADESHIP.

The world,—a jungle to the traveller
Who treads its tangled wilderness alone,
Fearful of beasts that watch the loiterer,
And coiled injustice marking him its own;
Or else a dreary waste of desert zone
That stretches far in dim horizon line;
Or mountain fastnesses with paths unknown
And depths wherein no friendly ray may shine.
But with the comrade of all comrades, life
Is guarded, sweet the common joys and woes;
A voice beside him singing, and the strife
That wages round him all unheeded goes.
A song, and all the world for him can change,
Only a song,—yet, it were passing strange.

LAKE TAHOE.

A lake of sapphire rimmed with jade
That shimmers from the eye
To pale blue peaks that melt and fade
Against a paler sky.

A plain of polished glass that gleams
With brilliant dancing light,
And softened round the margin dreams
In pictured malachite.

A lake of indigo and oil,
The boat, a silver wedge;
Two trains of brilliants flash and coil
Back from the cleaving edge.

Far at the head Mount Tallac lifts
His crest, brought strangely near,
His jealous crags hold fast the drifts
Through all the coaxing year.

The listening pines around the brink
Pause in their whispering,
Beneath the brim their needles sink
To waves soft murmuring.

Around, on guard, in hollow square,
Snow-decked Sierras stand,
To guard this lake so rare, so fair,—
This daughter of the band.

Beware this smiling lake, beware
This lake of mystery;
Who sinks but once beneath the fair
Blue crystal, sinks for aye!

And unknown currents seize and clasp
Unsounded depths to tell:
The secrets kept within their grasp
Are kept forever well.

SOUL TO BODY.

Body, I grieve to see you so,
Almost regret I let you go;
Yet all your misery is done,
While mine,—who knows?—is just begun.
But we had borne to our full strength
Of agony, had known the length
Of human pain and human woe,—
Then fell that superhuman blow!
Despair, the tempter, planned the way,
In those calm depths you should obey.
I made you yield and still your arms,
I made you stifle your alarms;
And death was easier for you
Than all the thousand deaths we knew
In life. Oh, it was bravely done,
My body,—I, the coward, won!
Farewell! We had been comrades long,—
Body, I meant to do no wrong!
It must be sweet to lie so still,
To find oblivion until
Atom by atom be resolved
And will and thought and self absolved!
Farewell! I go to unknown fate;
The pang of parting comes too late.
Drawn by a power to realms above:
To judgment? Ah, but God is love!

LOVE SONG.

Moonrise or sunrise, day or night,
My heart forever sings,
Sings till the world seems all delight,—
“I love, sweetheart, love thee!”

Give to the world all else but keep
This answer all for me;
Sing me the song that thrills my sleep:
“I love, I love but thee!”

Once the refrain were lost to me,
The joy of life were fled;
Silence that voice of ecstasy,
Then life and love were dead.

Heard I the song, though I were dead,
’Twould be a talisman;
Fearless, I’d follow where it led,
For love, for love of thee!

MERIT.

Give Success its meed of praises,
Famous song and deathless phrases:
Weight of wisdom, wealth of power,
Genius like a wondrous flower,
All shall have their measured glory,
Wreath of bay and martial story.
But a sweeter incense render,—
Born of pity, human, tender,—
Fated Unsuccess whose striving
Gained no crown of man's contriving;
Heard no plaudits, wrought no wonder,
Rent no mystic veil asunder.
Like the box of alabaster
That the woman brought the Master,
Bring the finest intuition,
Know dead hopes and vain ambition;
Feel the strife and know his weakness,
Bear defeat in noble meekness:
Then a victory he sought not
Give to him, O ye who fought not!
Like the precious ointment give it,
And a blessing shall outlive it.

EXPECTANCY.

A flower lifts its drooping head,
The air is moist with coming rain;
"A shower near," the light wind said,
And roused each petal's languid vein.

A thousand leaves within a wood,
Alert to greet the passing breeze;
Upon its poised stem each one stood,—
The gay breeze whirled through distant trees.

A child with upturned eager face
And grave eyes whose beseeching gaze
Asks with a longing, wistful grace
A promised joy that time delays.

A maiden at the trysting place;
The world a hum of noises seems.
She hears her lover's step outrace
The world of sound,—so fast she dreams.

An old man leans upon his staff;
Old friends are gone and all is dead
That gave a sparkle to his laugh,—
He plans no more, but waits, instead.

PROOF.

Unseal the eyes of men who seek
A proof of immortality;
Reveal a truth that all may see,
Let one great law of Nature speak.

Prove that this spirit will not die,
Prove that this body is not all,
Prove that this soul we know and call
Our own, is ours for aye and aye.

It must be evidence for one
Who sees component parts alone,—
Even the star dust is a stone
When his analysis is done.

Thus are we brought to common things,—
Plummet and scale and measured line;
Banished are faith and hope divine,
Worship and all tradition brings.

Economy the proof has found:
The reign of this law everywhere,—
In land and sea, in earth and air,—
Proclaims it rests on common ground.

God is the great economist:
In countless change through ages tossed,
The smallest atom is not lost
To Him, the master alchemist.

The great Sequoia shares the fate
Of wood-bloom that a day has braved;
To serve His purpose both are saved,—
To serve and wait, to serve and wait.

Will He who knows not loss, strike out
The fairest product of His hand?
Will He, who knows not waste, command
This wanton waste? Oh, who can doubt

That progress of the thought of man,—
First gift of God,—will not be lost!
The Maker knows no holocaust
Like this, in all His wondrous plan!

Annihilation is a fate .
Unknown in all the natural world;
Then who shall say this curse is hurled
At that fair soul we consecrate?

The march of progress leads me on,
I am a soldier with the rest;
But, keeping step, I claim my best,—
My soul is mine and mine alone!

Will He blot out this gain, withdraw
This glory of identity?
Deny the monstrous infamy
And prove it false by one great law!

INVOCATION.

Hail, Spirit of the Night,
Voice of the Infinite!
Charm with thy soft moonlight,
Mortals to thee!
Summon the secrets old,
Thy scrolls of stars unfold,
Ever, yet never, told—
O wondrous Night!

World among countless ones,
Wheeling to countless suns;
Ever the riddle runs,
“Oh, whither bound?”
Ages these seas have glowed,
Ages these tides have flowed,—
What do the years forebode?
O magic Night!

ALOFT.

O mountain top, could I meet death
Upon thy friendly crest,
With upturned face and bated breath
Await my promised rest!

This drifting Earth and I must part
Upon an unknown sea;
And all are mute as my own heart
To show the course to me.

It seems that I could see my way,—
To soar, to meet, to stop,—
From thy masthead the call obey,
O friendly mountain top!

VICTORY.

"I will not have it so!" I said.

"You cannot stay it," said the world.

"Then I will fight till I am dead!"

My armor girt, my flag unfurled.

Till faint and weary, wounded sore

And choked with battle smoke,—I won!

The victor stood alone no more,

What eager voices cried, "Well done!"

A lauding host proclaimed me crowned

With virtues—fainter came the sound,—

Great heart peace and great soul peace drowned,

The fickle world's applause.

A MOOD.

I know a mood so rich in joy of life,

So bound about with happy memories

And fair and radiant future, rife

With hopes,—space, atoms, worlds, are harmonies.

No black nor tawdry thought may enter here,

Nor chilling shapes of grim and awful fears;

Enwrapped in beauty like an atmosphere,

Soul speaks to body in a rush of tears!

DEEDS.

Deeds bring a crown or a lash,

Children of spirit and flesh:

Angels that comfort and cheer,

Demons that torture with fear;

Born in a breath,

Live through all life and all death.

SYMPATHY.

I flung the window wide,

My heart was dull with care,

A frantic voice wild cried—

My heeding was not there.

At length its terror woke

My fear-numbed heart to see,

And o'er my soul there broke

A flood of sympathy.

Ah! little bird, how like,

How like we earth-born are!

"Our nest! Our tree!"—Alike,

We banish Peace afar.

TO THE NEW HOME.

(Ode to the Century Club on Laying the Corner Stone.)

With eyes that look through tears across a space
Into the past where some we loved have stood,
Whose unseen presence fills a vacant place
Within the circle of this sisterhood:
And to the future, where we know must be
Only an empty, vacant place for some
Who stand with us today beneath the dome
Of an unclouded sky:
To place, to consecrate, this stone we come,
To build a dwelling-place, a hearth, a home.

Now, all the primal impulse of a man
For one plot of the earth to call his own,—
A sacred passion since the world began,—
Enraptures with a joy before unknown.
O, may this home be filled with happiness,
May it bring higher living, peace and rest,
Surcease of sorrow, loneliness and care,
Its pleasures numberless,
A haven to the weary and oppressed,
To all who come, to all who enter there.

WINTER IN SAN FRANCISCO.

It rains; they say that Winter's here—
A jovial, genial fellow, he.
His great fur coat is swinging wide,
A rose its lapel bears with pride,
Its pocket holds a fan beside;
A jovial, genial fellow, he.

Poor, haggard Summer whom all dread!
He basely laughs at her chagrin,
Her dun-colored gown and veil, poor thing!
He's stolen all she ought to bring,
Forlorn she's left through pilfering;
He basely laughs at her chagrin.

And where is Spring, that joyous youth?
Some breathe a dark and dreadful tale,
That tells an old man murdered lay,
And he who wears his garb so gay,
Is murderer Spring, with fun and play,—
'Tis better so, yet breathes the tale.

THE TRAMP.

He carries neither scrip nor purse,
But begs his bread and saves his curse
 To flavor it.

His home is on the dusty road;
Here is his living, and his code
 Lies in his wit.

There is no loving cup for him,
Instead, the cup with ragged rim
 Of charity.

But, though he's all that we despise,
Perhaps in this a reason lies
 For sympathy.

Then let us not forget the day
When each must go his weary way
 In sorest need;
Across the borders of a land
With unknown paths on every hand,—
 A tramp indeed!

LOST—A BOY.

All silent is the lonely house,
Forever free from noise;
All silent save for thoughts that rouse
 The presence of the boys.

For he is gone, the boy I knew,
Is gone beyond recall;
And I who watched him as he grew,
Most desolate of all.

He tired of luxury and ease
And longed for rougher ways,
He scorned the petty pleasantries
 That city life obeys.

The wide world claimed him for its own,
To keep him evermore.
My boy is gone,—forever gone
 The happy days of yore!

A stranger brought the news, forsooth,
He told it gently, too.
But in his eyes I read the truth,
 Of words there were but few.

My child who left, a happy boy,
Returned to me, a man!
And was it pain or was it joy,
O, answer me, who can?

THE FINISHED CHURCH.

The light falls softly through the pictured pane,
A rose and golden gleam, a purple stain;
The silent organ makes more silent still
The finished church that waits the first life thrill.

The wav'ring shadows cluster on the wall;
From their pale forms faint whispers seem to call.
Athwart the space o'erhead a murmur sweeps,
"I live!" from floor to roof the voice outleaps.

"My solemn trust to teach not text but soul,
The wondrous Word not one part but the whole,—
A creed of praise to God in love for man,
That all's divine within the Maker's plan.

To worship not alone with heart or hand,
With sanctioned prayer or rite obey command,
But, kneeling, with God's greatest gift adore,
The One who gave the mind from out His store.

Here, let strong brain and tender heart unite
In song, unfettered, praise the Infinite;
Uphold His majesty, protect His laws,
And, fearless, seek for truth within the cause."

The voice is stilled, but every arch responds,
Each purpling window quivers in its bonds,
Exultant rings the organ and again
Peal answers peal in glorious "Amen!"

January 31st, 1889.

COMPENSATION.

The Master prunes with care his orchard trees
And cuts the rank, waste growth of selfishness
Till all the useless branches are lopped off.
The tree, a-tremble with its quickened sap
Forgets its wounds in one great upward leap
And, stretching forth its arms to heaven, repays
This sorrow's kindness with a finer fruit.
Then, would the tree return to its wild state,
To bear the stunted fruit of former years?
What sorrow wounds the quivering soul so deep
That one would blot it out, if one must blot
Out with it all the added growth it brought!
The law of compensation moulds this clay
Inexorably, and makes heroes of
Us all, or cowards through presentiment
That some hard lot we watched descend upon
Another, shall one day become our own.





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